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Who you are and who you want to be are not always the same person. Willy imagines his life as (he remembers) it was, complete with a football star son, a job in which he is valued for his service and revered for his likability, and his position at the helm of his future, which is seemingly continually on the ascend. Instead, he has two “bums” for sons, and a job where he receives no salary and is called “kid” by a man 27 years his junior. (Miller 41, 102; 60) The whole of Willy’s turmoil can be surmised thusly: Willy builds up these great plans for his life and the lives of his sons, and is upset when they do not align with his vision. He then tortures himself concerning who is to blame for this misalignment, and in the process, completely forgets to see his sons (and his world) for who (and what) they are.

Willy’s ability to live vicariously through his son Biff makes Willy’s hopes for his son take on greater significance, in that they then become hopes for himself. Biff’s successes are Willy’s successes. The optimistic tone on which Act I ends is a reflection of the promise Willy believes will be realized in Biff. Biff’s assertion that he will see Bill Oliver for a job motivates Willy, to the point that he is pumped to ask for a permanent job in New York “first thing in the morning” (51). We see a glimpse of Willy’s connection to Biff’s life at the end of Act I:

WILLY: Like a young god. Hercules — something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him. Remember how he waved to me? Right up from the field, with the representatives of three colleges standing by? And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out — Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he’ll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away! (51)

The significance of the crowd chanting “Loman” instead of “Biff” is that it means Willy can directly identify with the crowd’s cheers. If the crowd had chanted “Biff,” it would have caused more of a disconnect, creating a barrier that would not have easily facilitated Willy’s slipping into his son’s praises. Rather, he is able to imagine the event as his success, instead of just his son’s success.

We are able to see Biff’s struggle between finding his own identity versus living up to the expectations placed on him by his family. Biff realizes that both he and his father would be better suited for careers that involved working with their hands, but delays committing to it because it is looked down upon. Willy intrudes on Biff discussing these dreams, and shows his disdain by replying, “even your grandfather was better than a carpenter” (44). Willy gravitates to selling because it is more respectable, and yet still wishes to be seen as tough and masculine, especially around his brother Ben. In contrast to his father, Biff does not have the overwhelming desire to impress people, and this is what causes him to question the value of the business world, especially when it does not value him (44). In the end, Biff realizes the hold that societal expectations have on him is not enough to dedicate his life to “an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of [him]self” (105). Even so, this struggle for Biff to define who he is is dwarfed in Willy’s inability to truly answer this question for himself. Willy sees Biff’s failure to “establish himself” as his own failure to raise him with the right ideals in mind, causing him to obsessively ask himself if he was right to instill these values in his sons. Bernard being the foil to Biff amplifies this obsession, as Willy was so invested in his family and yet they weren’t successful, and causes him to resent Charley because he “never took any interest” in his son Bernard, and yet they are both successful (74).

Willy Loman is a juggernaut. His life is traveling in one direction, which cannot be stopped or altered. He is on his path and must ride it to the end. He is unable to realize the ideal of the American dream, and this is interpreted as a failure on his own part, rather than a flaw in the dream itself. Even in the beginning of the play, Willy views nothing in life as being susceptible to chance:

LINDA: Well, dear, life is a casting off. It’s always that way.

WILLY: No, no, some people- some people accomplish something. (5)

Willy believes the American dream that someone “without a penny to his name” can make it is infallible (65). Because of this conviction, Willy never truly considers another path to go on. Even his death is reflective of his desire to provide for his family and to be able to label his life a success, and he never considers that it may not come through. (At Ben’s suggestion that the insurance company may not come through on the policy if Willy’s death is a suicide, Willy ridicules the possibility, and responds, “How dare they refuse? Didn’t I work like a coolie to meet every premium on the nose? And now they don’t pay off? Impossible!” (100)). In the Loman family, only Biff seems to learn that just because you follow the steps to success does not mean it is guaranteed to you. Just because you aspire to be a “leader of men” does not mean it is who you are meant to be (105). Willy never realizes this, and this lack of clarity is ultimately what leads to demise.